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THEATER

THEATER; A Talent Big Enough to Help Others Shine

By BARRY SINGER

DEBUT solo artists who willingly share the spotlight are not the rule in the music-theater business. Audra McDonald doesn't seem to understand this. Her first album, "Way Back to Paradise," to be released Sept. 22 by Nonesuch Records, functions as a primer not merely to the three-time Tony Award winner's vocal gifts, but to the work of several of the most promising young composers in musical theater today: Jason Robert Brown, Ricky Ian Gordon, Adam Guettel and Michael John LaChiusa, plus a talented newcomer, Jenny Giering. Their songs, sequenced as a suite, are the sum of Ms. McDonald's debut: 14 in all.

"We actually looked at Harold Arlen first," Ms. McDonald acknowledged recently in her dressing room at the Ford Center for the Performing Arts, where she is appearing in "Ragtime" as Sarah, a role that brought her a third Tony in June.

"I wish I could take credit," she added, her voice pitched high after a strenuous vocal class. "But the idea to do new composers was actually Bob Hurwitz's, the president of Nonesuch. I clicked to it immediately, though. People in this business so rarely take chances." So why has she? "When it's music that fills my soul," she said, "there's just no fear."

Born in Berlin 28 years ago, Ms. McDonald is the daughter of a college music major who served in the military and a mother who played the piano and sang, as did both her grandmothers. She grew up in Fresno, Calif., where five McDonald aunts toured (and, to this day, continue to tour) as a gospel troupe. In fact, her musical destiny seemed so genetically predetermined, Ms. McDonald said, laughing, that if she hadn't sung well, "I probably would have been sent back."

She served her apprenticeship at a local dinner theater, beginning at the age of 9, where she fell in love with the Broadway musical. A later headlong dive into opera at the Juilliard School proved devastating. "It wasn't me," she says now, wistfully. "I had danced around the room singing to Barbra Streisand. That's what I wanted to do."

Granted a "mental sabbatical" from school, she landed a part touring with the musical "The Secret Garden," slipped back into New York to audition for Lincoln Center Theater's impending "Carousel," only to faint, midsong, on the stage of the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater. She got the job anyway and wound up winning a Tony as Carrie Pipperidge. She canceled her next audition -- for Terrence

McNally's "Master Class" on Broadway -- in a panic a half hour before she was due to perform. Again she got the job and again she won a Tony.

She has titled her album after a LaChiusa song (sung by Ms. McDonald and Dawn Upshaw) from "Marie Christine," a musical that the composer has written for her and that Lincoln Center Theater is expected to produce next season. Two other songs come from Mr. LaChiusa's musical "Hello Again," seen in 1994 at Lincoln Center, while the ballad "You Don't Know This Man" by Mr. Brown is taken from another Lincoln Center Theater musical, "Parade," which begins performances at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in November.

Mr. Guettel's four contributions include "Come to Jesus" from "Saturn Returns," his cycle that was seen last season at the Joseph Papp Public Theater. (Nonesuch has recorded his 1996 musical "Floyd Collins.") Four more songs are by Mr. Gordon, including three from "Only Heaven," his cantata-like setting of verses by Langston Hughes. "I Follow," the lone composition by Ms. Giering, is sung by Ms. McDonald and the actress Theresa McCarthy.

As Ethel Merman had Gershwin, Porter and Berlin, Ms. McDonald now has Brown, Giering, Gordon, Guettel and LaChiusa, which is a nice thought.

Asked what she hoped listeners would take away from her new recording, she answered fiercely: "A desire to know these composers better."

Reminded that "Way Back to Paradise" is, after all, her record, Ms. McDonald giggled, then looked her questioner straight in the eye. "I'm nowhere near finished with these boys," she said. "And the girl."

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Photo: TAKING A CHANCE -- Audra McDonald, in her "Ragtime" dressing room. (Nancy Siesel/The New York Times)